Silence is a very painful thing. It deadens the air. It grows discomfort. It makes us worry, but it's one of those unavoidable facts of life. We will all eventually face these painful moments of silence, and we will never truly know how we react or feel about them until we are well submerged within them.

While my life previously had its quieter moments, never before had noise been so exiled from my surroundings. Feelings of unfamiliarity embrace me as I watch Cassie cry into the river. It's beyond sympathy, beyond sadness. It can't be guilt. Cassie's silver words had impaled guilt with a sharpened pike. Perhaps this is a new emotion, one which no one has ever felt before. I don't really like it.

We sit for who knows how long, just trying to batten down our feelings and get moving once again. My hand doesn't sting anymore. I look at it and try to will the pain back and create some sort of lesser distraction. Either the pain doesn't come, or I don't feel it. I sink it into the rushing water, and the pain still doesn't pierce. This emotion is desperate to travel with me for awhile.

"We should really get moving," I manage to say.

Cassie nods and we both get to our feet. We follow the flow of the river. I'm not an expert at this nature thing, but I know being next to a source of water is necessary for survival. We carry the burden of silence with us as we walk. It causes us to move slowly. I can tell that Cassie is trying to bury the puzzle of her past while I'm desperate to piece it together.

It can't be that simple, can it? Mommy and Daddy didn't want a child, and then they got one? Then they bring it to themselves to redeem that situation? Is it really that tortuously simple? I choose not to believe that. I'm willfully deluding myself, but sometimes it's worth it. I've come to touch all of the fires of reality in the past few months. Now I am finally forced to retract my hand. I pull it out and unveil blackened bones to myself.

I'm not the same person I was when this all started, am I? That might be why I don't recognize my decisions. I don't even recognize myself anymore. I'm feeling new emotions and doing new things. All it took was going bat-shit insane.

The only distraction from my inner turmoil is the shouting of my stomach. I frequently see berries dotting bushes in the forest, but I don't recognize any of them. The last thing I need right now is diarrhea. Then I see a bush of raspberries.

"Are you hungry?" I ask Cassie. She nods.

The three raspberries that I ate tasted divine. If I'm hungry now Cassie must be somewhere around starving. She eats them without hesitation as I gave them to her without consideration. That nagging feeling gets a little bit stronger and a little less bearable. As we return to walking I begin constructing questions that I don't want to know the answers to. If I cut the wrong wire either of us could explode with more excruciating emotions, but if I don't go in either of us could fall to the same fate.

"Cassie, do you want to talk about something?"

"Like what?"

"Anything, anything at all."

A wave of silence lapses our vessel. The answer is both yes and no. She wants to talk about everything, but she knows the cords of pain she'll strike if she does. I can see it in her eyes, debating whether or not to return to tears. I'm going to have to make her decision for her, aren't I? It's not that much easier for me, but I do manage to slide the answer towards yes.

I take a chisel and begin to sculpt a very delicate project. I start with simple flicks of the wrist, which barely make cracks in the marble. I make small talk. I ask her some of her favorites: her favorite food, her favorite class, nothing too painful for either of us. The more she answers me the more free the words become.

It's sort of the opposite for me. The more the final product is seen in my eye, the

more beautiful the marble becomes, and I find myself increasingly fearful of making a careless move. Each chink in the stone becomes increasingly delicate as I dig closer to the core. My chisel has grown dull. I need to make harder and harsher impacts to learn the true shape of this masterpiece.

I know her favorites and I know her physicalities, and I know that none of that really matters in the long run. They're just flavorings on top of what I already knew. For me to truly learn about Cassie I'm going to have to hit something, something painful. I don't know if it's worth it yet. To delay the inevitable I intersperse the conversation with details about myself. The first thing that I tell her is that she doesn't have to call me Mr. Wright—my name is simply Andrew.

I do tell her things beyond the casual simplicities. I talk about my job and my relationships, and I even turn to the past where some of my own scars begin to show. They've long since scabbed over so they don't bother me much anymore. I notice how Cassie almost seems ignorant to her own scars, even though they are bleeding openly. I want to ask how she can still stand with such catastrophe chasing her, but if she's not feeling them I don't want to make her.

Our conversation is interrupted by a crashing noise. Even from this distance I can see that there's a waterfall rolling over a cliff. That leaves us with only one option: we must turn away from the river, at least until we can get to the bottom of the cliff. The rushing water fades from the noise around us, leaving us with an even deader silence than before.

I choose to focus on not the sounds, but the sights that surround us. If I didn't know any better the roaring colors of autumn would have some description of beauty. I've seen them every year since I was born, and they've become dull and boring. Its the same hues of yellow and the same hues of red that do nothing more than signal the beginning of winter, and I've always hated winter and the cold.

A chill runs across my chest. I don't need to look through the canopy to know that the day has come to its end. The increasingly brisk winds tell the time for me. There's no shelter to be found for miles in any direction so we just stop where we are. Cassie is already shivering. I see goosebumps on her arms. She's colder than I am.

I begin banging rocks together, hoping that a magical flame will burst forth. It doesn't. I just sit there banging rocks together like an idiot, almost willing them to crush each other. I know that I have no idea in the slightest on how to start a fire, but I keep banging those rocks together. After what seems like forever I drop the rocks into the dirt. I lay myself next to a tree and just stare at those rocks.

"I'm sorry Cassie," I almost pout. "I can't even start a goddamn fire."

"It's okay..."

"No, it's not okay. You're cold. I'm cold. And my incompetence keeps causing both of us problems."

"'Incompetence?'"

"It means I don't know how to do a damn thing."

"Mister... um... Andrew, you don't really believe that, do you?"

"No... I don't really believe that. It's just... there's always something I don't know how to do, no matter what I try."

"You can always learn..."

"Yeah, if we don't freeze to death," I say.

Cassie's teeth begin chattering. She comes close. I begin to ask her what she's doing, but she stops me by embracing me in a hug. I don't know what to make of it

until her head slumps onto my shoulder. She's fallen asleep in my warmth. I don't feel so cold anymore.

I'm not able to sleep yet. Even after a long day of walking through the middle of nowhere I don't exactly feel tired. Even if I did then the spikes of pain in my chest and the swelling of my hand would jar me awake every time my eyelids would droop. The pain had vanished through most of the day since I was forced to concentrate on more important things, but now there is just me and the pain; a sour juxtaposition to the near silent night.

The only thing that breaks the silence is the chirping of crickets. It sort of reminds me of before all of this began. I half expect bickering to erupt from the bushes. The only thing that manages to come out is rustling. It's probably a raccoon scavenging for food, and that thought reminds me of my hunger.

The facts state that an adult man can survive about three weeks without food. Strange, it feels like I can't survive one day. Hunger writhes and convulses in my stomach. I hear the continued rustling. I hold a sturdy branch in my hand. It's an interesting thought, and one that I am willing to entertain. I'm not that far feral or insane to act upon it, but the thought of having a meal does keep me slightly happy. Perhaps tomorrow I'll find the fruits of the forest for the both of us.

I've stared into nothingness all night. I watched the gray of the abyss gradually change into black and experienced blindness for some time before my eyes grew used to the darkness around me. I hoped for the fireflies to create their light show, but at this time of year they've been long since gone.

We lost the cold in each other's heat. Cassie slept like an angel, pardon the cliche, but there is no other way I could describe it. It's the lost kind of innocence that spreads some sort of hope and light that keeps the terror of the night at the bay. It makes me wonder if she finds my warmth just as comforting, or just comforting enough.

My arm has long fallen asleep; if only the rest of me could be as lucky. Through the cracks in the canopy I see the canvas of stars up above us. Distant creatures of cosmos, exploding nebulae, and versatile arrangements of stars paint the scene as

beautiful. Is this what heaven feels like? My body is broken, my stomach pierces knives into my chest, and yet I could not be happier.

This moment won't end anytime soon. I have a night of bliss before I am forced to deal with the harshness of reality once more. It's strange, isn't it? I always thought of how set in stone my life was. My death had been planned out since the moment I was born, and every little stop within it just as rigid and determined. Go to school, go to college, get a job, get married, have children, guide them on the same route, and then die "happy." For the first time I have broken away from the path to avalon. For the first time I am truly happy.